

Jesus!

“The Coming of Jesus’ Kingdom” (Luke 17:20-37)

Take a first look.

I. **Os Guinness is worth reading, no matter what the title, because he always wisely reviews human culture from a decidedly Christ-centered viewpoint.** He wrote this some years ago: “The futility of a life apart from Jesus Christ is illustrated in the life of Bertrand Russell. Russell was an English Voltaire, Cambridge educated, child of privilege, renowned philosopher and mathematician, and famous for his diamond-sharp intellect.... Russell’s powers of analysis were so formidable that one friend called him ‘The Day of Judgment.’ Russell once wrote, ‘I feel myself so rugged and ruthless, and somewhat removed from the whole aesthetic side of life—a sort of logic machine warranted to destroy any idea that is not very robust.’

“But this was not the whole story of Russell’s life. His life was anything but a logic machine in the way he lived. He was orphaned at the age of three by the death of his parents, and orphaned philosophically at the age of sixteen by his atheism. His life was a search for a home, for love, and for children of his own. All his life he was torn between his atheism, his four wives, and many mistresses. This man who thought of himself as a logic machine wrote:

“The root of the whole thing is loneliness. I have a kind of physical loneliness, which almost anybody can more or less relieve, but which would be only fully relieved by a wife and children. Beyond that, I have a very internal and terrible spiritual loneliness.... I have dreamed of a combination of spiritual and physical companionship, and if I had the good fortune to find it, I could have become something better than I shall ever be.”¹

II. Knowing Jesus Christ in a personal relationship is truly the essential spiritual relationship that gives meaning to all else and which makes us better people than we could ever be without Him. This relationship also prepares us for the future, with all of its uncertainties, its hopes and its fears.

III. Our present world is consumed with a fascination regarding the future. Entire network television channels are devoted to speculations and fantasies about possible future scenarios, the Sci-fi Channel for instance. The unbelievable sale of the *Left Behind* series of books written by pastor Tim LaHaye and editor Jerry Jenkins has made these two men quite wealthy. I don’t recommend the approach they take to interpretation of Scripture in their writing of fiction (as though it is history yet to be made). Yet, the very phenomena of the publication of these books says that people are truly interested in speculations about the future.

It was no different in Jesus’ time. The beginning of the Third Millennium is similar to the beginning of the first in this regard. People in Jesus’ time were also caught up in hopes and fears about the future, especially the future of those they considered the people of God at the time, the nation of Israel. Would the nation rise once again to world dominion? When would it happen? How would the people know when that time came? Not surprisingly, Jesus was asked questions like these, and His answers were surprising, then and now. He turned the attention away from the *calendar* and turned it to the *heart*.

Jesus spoke to the very need that Bertrand Russell so eloquently recognized but which he seems never to have allowed to be truly satisfied. The teaching about the coming of the kingdom of God still addresses this same need, and it calls us to make a response to Him while we can.

¹ Os Guinness, *Long Journey Home: A Guide to Your Search for the Meaning of Life* (Doubleday, 2001), pp. 3-4; submitted by Aaron Goerner, New Hartford, New York, to Preaching Today.

Take a closer look at Luke 17:20-37.

Insights:

I. THE NATURE OF JESUS' KINGDOM IS DEFINED BY THE STATE OF THE HEART NOT THE CALENDAR.

1. *The Pharisees were concerned about when the Jewish nation would rise to world prominence again.* It is pretty well agreed that this is what they meant by "When will the kingdom of God come?" They considered the kingdom a political entity, with a capitol city and a government structure. They wondered how long Rome would remain in control of the country of Israel and when Israel would cast off their oppression and gain military and political power again.

2. *Jesus turned the focus from the "when?" to the "where?"* He said, in effect, that the kingdom of God is not something around which political boundaries can be drawn ("Here it is" or "There it is"). Rather, it has to do with the realm of the King Himself. The kingdom of God is a spiritual entity.

Insight: The kingdom of God has come wherever the rule of the King is confessed.

I—Our youth know that public education is a realm where God is often officially uninvited. Yet, as the saying goes, "As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in school."

Do you remember the terrible event that occurred on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado? Two young men wearing long black trench coats walked into the Columbine High School, took out various weapons and begin shooting at random. When the gory spree had ended, 12 students were dead along with one teacher. Many others were wounded, some very seriously. The nation was shocked.

And as we saw in the aftermath of the shootings, when crisis strikes, everyone knows where to turn. They don't turn to the people who can only offer friendship and "presence"; they turn to those who can point to God as well. The reports I read after that fateful day in the spring of 1999 indicated that the mental health professionals that were called in to give counsel and comfort to the students were hardly consulted. However, the local churches were filled, and the local pastors and youth workers were surrounded by youth, parents, and families seeking help and support to cope with the pain (See the Addendum for some details about those killed.)

Sadly, God was not invited into the realm of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the two high school students that killed the others and finally killed themselves at Columbine High School. They were on their own. The results were deadly in their case. But God has truly brought comfort beyond words and beyond imaginations to those suffering. His kingdom has come through the grace and healing that many have experienced over the years since that harrowing trauma.

I urge all of you children and youth today, do not allow God to be banished from your realm of learning! Invite Him in yourself, even if administrators and teachers don't. Recognize what Chuck Colson affirmed when he argued that, as Christians, "We see all of life through the prism of God's eyes. Everything!" Colson told about a great statesman and educator of the past: "When dedicating Free University, which [Abraham Kuyper] founded in Amsterdam, ... the great Dutch theologian and president of the Netherlands at the turn of the twentieth century, said, 'There is not one square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ who is sovereign does not cry out "Mine!"'"²

II. THE FULFILLMENT OF JESUS' KINGDOM IS DEFINED BY THE PRESENCE OF THE KING.

² Charles Colson, "The Great Hope for the New Millennium," in *Chuck Colson Speaks* (Promise Press, 2000), p. 52.

1. Jesus warned the disciples that they would long for even one of “the days of the Son of Man,” when He was physically present with them. It would not be possible then. Here, Jesus foretells that the mode of His revelation to His followers would be changing, that His physical presence would not be a permanent aspect of His work in humanity, but that a time would come when He would only be spiritually present, the time which is fulfilled right now as His Holy Spirit reveals His presence with us.

In John 14:15-18, This promise is made more clearly: (NIV) “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

2. Jesus also warned that false reports of His coming would arise before He truly returned but that all would know it when His day came. He foretold that just as people were trying to write the boundaries of the kingdom of God (“Here it is!” “There it is!”), so they would be giving false reports of His coming: “Here he is!” “There he is!” However, He taught His disciples that there would be no doubt about His arrival: “The Son of Man in His day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.”

If you have to get in your car to go see Jesus when He allegedly returns, it will not truly be Jesus. When He comes again, it will be with a cataclysmic undoing of all that we know.

Paul expands on this well in His inspired words to the Christians in ancient Thessalonica: (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, NIV) “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

This is meant to be great encouragement to those who remain after the death of our loved ones who know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They will not be left out of the full blessing of the coming kingdom. In fact, they are enjoying it as I speak.

3. Jesus said that first, He would face His suffering. Verse 25 makes it clear what would lie in the immediate future for our Lord Jesus Christ. “But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.” He knew that the Cross would come before the Crown, that He would suffer death for the sins of the world before He would be recognized as supreme. This was a necessary means to His ultimate end.

He knew that He had to enter into our suffering in every way, so that He could truly save us completely.

Hebrews 2:14-18 (NIV): “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

He came ultimately to help us find forgiveness for sins, strength against temptation, and ultimately freedom from sin and temptation forever in heaven.

Insight: The fulfillment of the kingdom of God will come with power and glory when Jesus comes again.

I—The president’s State of the Union address in 2002 made reference to the experience of the presence of God in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He said clearly that not only had many aid workers shown up to help with the search for survivors and the treatment of those injured, but that God Himself had shown up, too. This doesn’t surprise us. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17, NIV). When we are the most broken and vulnerable, God comes near. His Spirit draws us to the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. The very Son of God, in the prophetic words of Isaiah, “was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.” Here is that prophetic image [Isaiah 53:4-6, NIV]:

He Himself “*took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*”

Yet this Suffering Servant will return as the Almighty God when He comes again. His second great coming will be for the purpose of setting all things right in His Cosmos. It will mean eternal life for those who belong to Him and eternal separation from God in hell for those who reject His grace and mercy.

III. THE ANTICIPATION OF JESUS’ KINGDOM IS DECLARED AS A WARNING TO THE WORLD.

1. *Jesus compared the End Time to the times of Noah and Lot.* In both of these comparisons, the same things are said: “People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all” (v. 27). “People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed” (vv. 28b-30).

This is a solemn warning to take seriously this time of God’s grace, so that the time of His judgment doesn’t fall on us.

2. *Jesus made it clear that His coming would be sudden, decisive, and divisive.* Vv. 30-35 are important teaching in this regard. No one should go back to his or her house to get anything when His day of revelation comes. It will be too late, and those things won’t matter anyway. Don’t look back! He warns. “Remember Lot’s wife!” (v. 32). In the story of Lot escaping from the destruction of the hardened and evil people of Sodom, we are told that she looked back, contrary to the command of the Lord through His angel, and she turned into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26).

The day of Jesus’ final revelation will not only be sudden, it will be decisive. “Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it” (v. 33). Here is a fundamental paradox about true life. To cling to that which we can’t keep will mean the loss of all that it worth keeping. But to be willing even to die for that which is worth keeping will mean the saving of all that it truly life.

That day will also be divisive, in that some will be taken and others will be left. This can be interpreted in two ways. Those “taken” can be understood as those who are “caught up together with [the dead in Christ who will rise first] in the clouds,” in the words of Paul from 1 Thessalonians 4:17, or it can mean those who are, in the parable of Jesus, like the weeds that are pulled out of the good

heads of grain by the angels in the final separation (see Matthew 13:40-43).

Either way, it is clear that there is a final separation of all people, between those who are truly the people of God because they have put their faith in His Son, and those who are not His people because they have rejected God's clearest Word about Himself.

3. *Jesus also made it clear that His coming would be a universal event for the entire world.* "Where will this happen?" asked the disciples. Jesus' answer was enigmatic: "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather." In fact, it will be a global and universal event. Wherever the spiritually dead are found, there will be the harvest of judgment.

Insight: The anticipation of the fulfillment of God's kingdom should compel us to make preparation.

I—Paul urges such preparation, too, in his inspired appeal to the people of Corinth: "[2 Corinthians 6:1-2 (NIV)] *As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." {Isaiah 49:8} I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.*"

The time is now for all of us. The kingdom of God is truly coming, in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory. Are we prepared to meet Him?

Elesha Coffman, former editor of *Christian History* magazine, told a story that illustrates the urgency of our present window of opportunity. "John Harper was born into a Christian family May 29, 1872. He became a Christian 13 years later and had already started preaching by age 17. He received training at the Baptist Pioneer Mission in London, and in 1896 he founded a church, now known as Harper Memorial Church, which began with 25 worshipers but had grown to 500 members by the time he left 13 years later.

"In 1912 Harper, the newly called pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, was traveling on the Titanic with his 6-year-old daughter. After the ship struck an iceberg and began to sink, he got Nana into a lifeboat but apparently made no effort to follow her. Instead, he ran through the ship yelling, 'Women, children, and unsaved into the lifeboats!' Survivors report that he then began witnessing to anyone who would listen. He continued preaching even after he had jumped into the water and was clinging to a piece of wreckage (he'd already given his lifejacket to another man).

"Harper's final moments were recounted four years later at a meeting in Hamilton, Ontario, by a man who said:

I am a survivor of the Titanic. When I was drifting alone on a spar that awful night, the tide brought Mr. Harper of Glasgow, also on a piece of wreck, near me. "Man," he said, "are you saved?" "No," I said, "I am not." He replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

The waves bore him away, but, strange to say, brought him back a little later, and he said, "Are you saved now?" "No," I said, "I cannot honestly say that I am." He said again, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," and shortly after he went down; and there, alone in the night, and with two miles of water under me, I believed. I am John Harper's last convert.

"He was also one of only six people picked out the water by the lifeboats; the other 1,522, including Harper, were left to die."³

³ Elesha Coffman, "Sacrifice at Sea," Christianhistory.net (8-11-00), adapted from *The Titanic's Last Hero* (Moody Press, 1997)

Take it home (applications).

- I. My friends, are we in the lifeboat or not today?
- II. Will we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved?
- III. Will we warn others by our lives and words?

ADDENDUM:

I logged onto the memorial web site for those killed in that rampage at Columbine a couple of years after it happened. It had had over 10 million hits (visits) at the site since it was created. I looked at the photos and read the short memorial biographies there of Cassie Bernall (a newly committed Christian), Corey DePooter (who had his wisdom teeth removed not long before his death and hated to miss school), Daniel Mauser (straight-A student and member of the French club), Isaiah Shoels (described as “the nicest person I knew” by a classmate), John Tomlin (a young Christian who had gone with a missions team to Mexico to build houses the summer before), Kyle Velasquez (a special need boy who always radiated a smile), Lauren Townsend (captain of the girl’s volleyball team and senior class Valedictorian for the 1999 graduating class), Matthew Kechter (straight-A student and aspiring football player), Rachel Scott (young actor and vibrant Christian). This note was left on her casket [read here]⁴), Steven Curnow (aspiring Navy “top gun” pilot who knew the Star Wars movies by heart), Daniel Rohrbough (who helped his father in his electronic business and was killed as he helped other students to safety), Kelly Fleming (aspiring singer and song-writer), and a teacher with 24 years of experience in computer and business education, William “Dave” Sanders (who coached girl’s softball and basketball, was married and had two children and five grandchildren. He was killed as he directed students down a hallway to safety).

⁴ “Honey, you are everything a mother could ever ask the Lord for in a daughter. I love you so much! Mom.”